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WITTGENSTEIN'S ENIGMATIC REMARKS ON SHAKESPEARE

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Ludwig Wittgenstein's remarks on William Shakespeare, though small in number, have raised a considerable amount of interest and bewilderment among scholars. The few observations, all of which are contained in posthumously published *Notebooks*, express a distanced attitude not only towards the Bard but also towards the culture to which the latter belongs. Wittgenstein does not, however, embed Shakespeare's work in a larger context, nor does he make any effort to explain or justify his judgment, which might be due to the diaristic character of the notebooks in which they are contained. It should, therefore, not come as a surprise that they have been interpreted in very different and mutually incompatible ways. Some interpreters have suggested that they display a misreading of Shakespeare's work; others have argued that they reveal more about Wittgenstein, his aesthetic judgement, or his philosophical agenda than the significance or the literary quality of Shakespeare's work. In what follows I will first expose Wittgenstein's remarks and then focus on the ambivalent reactions they have evoked among scholars.

Wittgenstein's remarks on Shakespeare

Wittgenstein did not mention Shakespeare in the works he published or prepared for publication during his lifetime. In his entire *Nachlass* we find only seven remarks on the Bard, most of which were composed very late: the earliest one, where Wittgenstein puts down an idea he attributes to his friend Paul Engelmann (Wittgenstein (1998: 42)), is dated 1939–40; the six others were written between 1946 and 1950. All of them were selected by the editor G.H. von Wright to become part of the posthumously published volume *Culture and Value*.

It might be useful to begin by highlighting some characteristics of Wittgenstein's remarks on Shakespeare. In particular I think the following points are worth noting. (1) One cannot but notice the complete absence of any textual evidence. Wittgenstein did not make the minimal effort to illustrate his points with concrete examples of Shakespeare's works, nor did he discuss, quote, or even mention a single work of

Shakespeare. Moreover, (2) when discussing the quality of Shakespeare's work, Wittgenstein almost always did so in the conditional mode and often seemed to take back or relativize what he had said just a sentence earlier, as if he had wanted to avoid taking a stance. He began one remark, for example, with the statement that 'Shakespeare's similes are, *in the ordinary sense*, bad,' and suggested in the very next sentence: 'So if they are nevertheless good – & I don't know whether they are or not – they must be a law to themselves' (Wittgenstein (1998: 56)). Finally, (3) Wittgenstein never contextualized Shakespeare's work, nor did he contrast it with that of other poets. At one point he mentioned Milton, but he did so only to state that he trusts his authority in the assessment of Shakespeare's work (Wittgenstein (1998: 55)). In two passages he compares Shakespeare with Beethoven.

The formal structure of Wittgenstein's observations is quite typical for his later work, which consists of short, sometimes even aphoristic remarks that stand in loose and unsystematic connections to one another. Wittgenstein made no recognizable effort to systematically develop a unifying thought, a distinct hypothesis, or a comprehensive perspective on Shakespeare's work. He clearly did not aim at contributing to Shakespeare scholarship, nor did he aim at proposing a new reading of his work. In most of the remarks he confronted his own reaction to Shakespeare's work with that of others, acknowledging his own inability to open himself to the aesthetic quality or beauty of the work as well as his difficulty to 'read him *with ease*' (Wittgenstein (1998: 56)). He typically went on to examine the motives others might have had to admire Shakespeare's work, focusing on both the psychological and sociological mechanisms that bring people to express their appreciation – and in these contexts Wittgenstein often voiced his suspicions concerning the sincerity of their judgments – as well as the aesthetic properties of the work that could or, in fact, do justify a positive assessment.

With regard to the former point, we read: 'I am *deeply* suspicious of most of Shakespeare's admirers' (Wittgenstein (1998: 95)), for they seem to be so for the wrong reasons: 'I can never rid myself of a suspicion that praising him has been a matter of convention, even though I have to tell myself that this is not the case'. Only a few lines later we see that this impression is particularly forceful when related to academic circles: 'an enormous amount of praise has been & still is lavished on Shakespeare without understanding & for specious reasons by a thousand professors of literature' (Wittgenstein (1998: 55)).

Since Wittgenstein suggests that this blind admiration of Shakespeare is widely shared, his remarks can be taken to indicate a feeling of estrangement from the culture to which the latter belongs. This impression is confirmed by another of Wittgenstein's remarks on Shakespeare: 'I think that, in order to enjoy a poet, you have to *like* the culture to which he belongs as well. If you are indifferent to this or repelled by it, your admiration cools off' (Wittgenstein (1998: 96)). Given that in other remarks Wittgenstein praises Milton and that he focuses a lot on the reception of Shakespeare among *admirers* and *professors of literature*, I take that 'the culture to which he belongs' does not refer to the culture in which Shakespeare was writing but the cultural tradition of which he is regarded a central figure – that of English literature. Wittgenstein's affirmation, thus, seems to suggest that there is a habit of placing Shakespeare on a pedestal so high that he becomes unapproachable; genuine appreciation risks degenerating into blind veneration – and he makes it quite clear that he does not feel himself to be part of a culture where this sentiment is dominant.

More interesting, in my view, are the passages where Wittgenstein ponders which characteristics of Shakespeare's work could justify his reputation, for they display a distinctive perspective on the poet. Several of these remarks seem to suggest that he regarded Shakespeare as a lonesome genius who played in a league of his own and who could not, in consequence, be captured in the framework of our established categories. 'I think the trouble is that, in western culture at least, he stands alone & so one can only place him by placing him wrongly' (Wittgenstein (1998: 95)). In other places he called him a 'phenomenon', 'almost like a spectacle of nature', which one could only 'regard . . . in amazement' (Wittgenstein (1998: 96)). He noted Shakespeare's 'effortlessness' (Wittgenstein (1998: 56)) and his 'supple hand' (Wittgenstein (1998: 95)), which made his works look like 'enormous *sketches*, not paintings; as though they were *dashed off* by someone who could permit himself *anything*, so to speak' (Wittgenstein (1998: 98)).

> I do not think that Shakespeare can be set alongside any other poet. Was he perhaps a *creator of language* rather than a poet? I could only stare in wonder at Shakespeare; never do anything with him.
>
> (Wittgenstein (1998: 95))

As a consequence, Wittgenstein suggests, Shakespeare's work needs to be judged 'according to a law of its own' (Wittgenstein (1998: 85)). In order to assess the aesthetic quality of Shakespeare's work, thus, one needs to analyse not a single work but the body of works as a whole: 'the style of his whole work, I mean, of his complete works is in this case what is essential, & provides the justification' (Wittgenstein (1998: 56)). Wittgenstein does seem to consider that in this thought he has found a key to understanding the aesthetic quality of Shakespeare's work: 'If Shakespeare is great, then he can be so only in the whole *corpus* of his plays, which create their *own* language & world' (Wittgenstein (1998: 89)).

Wittgenstein, thus, at least considered what could be regarded valuable in Shakespeare's work, but he also made clear that these motives did not convince him. In the sentence that follows he called Shakespeare 'completely unrealistic. (Like a dream)' (Wittgenstein (1998: 89)). In his last remark on Shakespeare – which is the only remark where he expresses a judgment of taste – he was more direct: 'And I understand how someone may admire this & call it *supreme* art, but I don't like it' (Wittgenstein (1998: 98)). Wittgenstein portrayed Shakespeare as cold and distant – this becomes particularly clear in the places where he compared him with Beethoven:

> 'Beethoven's great heart' – no one could say 'Shakespeare's great heart'. 'The supple hand that created new natural forms of language' would seem to me nearer the mark. The poet cannot really say of himself 'I sing as the bird sings' – but perhaps S. could have said it of himself.
>
> (Wittgenstein (1998: 96))

Finally, Wittgenstein concluded his last remark on Shakespeare with the words: 'someone who admires him as one admires Beethoven, say, seems to me to misunderstand Shakespeare' (Wittgenstein (1998: 98)).

In sum, Wittgenstein used his occasional remarks on Shakespeare to express a clearly distanced stance towards the poet who symbolizes and represents more than anyone else

the culture of the country in which he had chosen to live the great part of his mature life. Wittgenstein acknowledged the aesthetic quality of Shakespeare's work but did not keep it a secret that he had not succeeded in opening himself to this dimension. In addition, he hinted that Shakespeare did not exemplify his ideal of a poet. As he did not make any attempt to explain or justify his claims, however, his remarks remained enigmatic and have, in consequence, evoked very different reactions among scholars.

How Wittgenstein's remarks have been read: accusations and exculpations

All of Wittgenstein's remarks on Shakespeare have been included in *Culture and Value*, a posthumous selection of passages from Wittgenstein's notebooks that did not – as the editor, G.H. von Wright, explains in the foreword – 'belong directly with his philosophical works although they are scattered among the philosophical texts' (Wittgenstein (1998: ix)). The volume was first published in 1977, in a period, that is, when Wittgenstein's philosophical works had already aroused a great interest not only among professional philosophers but also a broader audience and in particular among writers and artists (Huemer (2004)). This secured the book a high visibility, in particular because the title of the English translation – unlike the German *Vermischte Bemerkungen* [Miscellaneous Remarks] – promised reflections on questions concerning *culture* and *value*. It seems, however, that the observations contained in the volume, and especially the remarks on Shakespeare, could not live up to the high expectations of parts of the audience. In fact, most of the interpreters who commented on the latter seemed to struggle with the tone of Wittgenstein's observations. Some accused him outright of having misread Shakespeare (for example, Steiner (1996)), while others tried to interpret Wittgenstein in a more benevolent manner, taking into account his own cultural background (Perloff (2014)) or suggesting that Wittgenstein's remarks are not really about Shakespeare (Huemer (2013); Schulte (2013)). Concerning this latter attempt, Derek McDougall has recently made an interesting observation that applies, I think, to other, less charitable interpretations: in many cases, the motive to comment on Wittgenstein's remarks on Shakespeare can be explained

> almost entirely by the fact that philosophers feel that they must 'come to terms' with remarks that are difficult to reconcile with either an acceptance of Wittgenstein's critical acumen or with a general agreement about the greatness of Shakespeare as a poet.
>
> (McDougall (2016: 303))

Many interpreters were, it seems, just puzzled by Wittgenstein's remarks on Shakespeare; given his sensitivity to art and his general interest in literature (Bru et al. (2013)), the reserved and unenthusiastic attitude expressed in the remarks did not seem to fit. In addition, there is circumstantial evidence that seems to testify that Wittgenstein had a positive outlook on Shakespeare: M.O'C. Drury, for example, recalls that in 1930 Wittgenstein had seen a performance of Shakespeare's play *King Lear* that he had called a 'most moving experience' (Drury (1981: 133)). Nearly twenty years later, in the fall of 1948, Wittgenstein mentioned that he had considered 'using as a motto for my book a quotation from *King Lear*: "I'll teach you differences"'(Drury (1981: 171)). In several letters to friends Wittgenstein reports having seen performances of Shakespeare's plays: Cyril

Barrett (1988: 387) lists Shakespeare among Wittgenstein's favourite authors, and Brian McGuinness (1988: 36) suggests that Wittgenstein was familiar with Shakespeare's work from childhood on.

What, then, explains the distanced and negative tone of Wittgenstein's remarks? Several interpreters have attributed it, on the one hand, to the distance between the culture from which Shakespeare's work has emerged and, on the other, to the one in which Wittgenstein was acculturated. Both George Steiner and Marjorie Perloff have pointed out that Wittgenstein's ideal of the poet has been formed in a German-speaking country in the late nineteenth century. Steiner suggests that this cultural background led Wittgenstein to hang on to an ideal of the poet as a moral guide – 'a truth-sayer, an explicitly moral agent, a visible teacher to and guardian of the imperilled, bewildered mankind' (Steiner (1996: 123)) – and that Wittgenstein looked out for this ideal in Shakespeare, but what he found was a 'natural phenomenon' who created his own language but did not speak ours. Wittgenstein's critique of Shakespeare might have been influenced by Tolstoy's, as Peter Lewis suggests, and his disappointment might be explained by the perceived 'absence of ethical vision' (Lewis (2005: 252)) in Shakespeare's work. Steiner criticizes Wittgenstein not for holding this ideal of a poet but for not realizing that Shakespeare did, in fact, live up to it. 'At every juncture of generality and detail', Steiner states, 'Wittgenstein's critique and negation can be faulted' (Steiner (1996: 126)). Wittgenstein's critique of Shakespeare is, according to Steiner, based on a misreading that reveals that a 'great logician and epistemologist can be a blind reader of literature' (Steiner (1996: 127)) (for a critical discussion of Steiner's and Lewis's reading of Wittgenstein's remarks on Shakespeare, see Huemer (2012)).

Unlike Steiner, Marjorie Perloff takes note of the fact that Wittgenstein did not aim at giving a new or comprehensive interpretation of Shakespeare's work and acknowledges that his remarks are 'fragmentary and diaristic' (Perloff (2014: 263)). When she alludes to Wittgenstein's cultural background, she does so by shedding light on the formation of his taste and his aesthetic preferences in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Vienna: that is, in a cultural background that brought him to adopt a very particular perspective and raised quite specific expectations for art and literature in him. 'Wittgenstein's mistrust was a function of his peculiar Germanic modernity, his lack of understanding for anything as remote as the English Renaissance, which has taken place four centuries earlier' (Perloff (2014: 264)). Perloff, thus, argues that Wittgenstein's difficulties to open himself to Shakespeare's work and to partake in the activities of those who – in Wittgenstein's eyes uncritically – admire Shakespeare's work is due to his cultural formation.

Perloff's explanation is, in my view, much more plausible than the one offered by Terence Hawkes, who argues on much more generic terms that Wittgenstein's perception of Shakespeare was determined by the fact that in the UK Wittgenstein must have felt like a cultural outsider. 'No doubt Wittgenstein's alienated position as a German-speaking Viennese Jew living in Britain urged – even required – him (whether or not at a conscious level) to see Shakespeare as he did' (Hawkes (1988: 60)). Wittgenstein had lived in the UK for many years; he went there as a student and returned to live and work – and die – there in his mature years. It is quite plausible to assume that he felt alienated by some aspects of English culture – and we have the testimonies of persons who knew Wittgenstein that he was very critical about it. Norman Malcolm, for example, mentions the 'great distaste he had for English culture and mental habits in general' (Malcolm (1984: 26f.)). It is equally plausible, however,

to assume that he would have felt alienated in all other parts of the world as well – and in particular in his home country Austria. Wittgenstein, it seems, felt at home more with persons with whom he could share a certain (cultural) perspective than with places, countries, or cultural traditions. In a remark from 1931 Wittgenstein writes:

> If I say that my book is meant for only a small circle of people (if that can be called a circle) I do not mean to say that this circle is in my view the élite of mankind but it is the circle to which I turn (not because they are better or worse than the others but) because they form my cultural circle, as it were my fellow countrymen in contrast to the others who are *foreign* to me.
>
> (Wittgenstein (1998: 12f.))

Wittgenstein's distance from Shakespeare, thus, is not the result of his feeling foreign to British culture. Rather, his comments on Shakespeare might be an expression of his own cultural standpoint. If we confront Wittgenstein's remarks on Shakespeare with those on other poets, composers, or artists, a striking structural similarity comes to the fore: Wittgenstein often names persons and sketches a certain perspective on them, but he hardly ever elaborates, justifies, or substantiates his claims. One can, therefore, conclude that 'the finely articulated web of the many cultural references' that we find in Wittgenstein's *Nachlass* 'also serves the purpose of letting an elaborate self-portrait emerge, and at the same time, of providing a key for those readers who are able to recognize the lock' (Huemer (2013: 33)) – that is, those who understand his remarks on composers, poets, and artists not as contributions to discussions of their works but as means to present his own perspective on them.

This short discussion shows, I hope, that there is dispute among scholars on the impact and the exact nature of Wittgenstein's cultural distance from Shakespeare, on the perspective that Wittgenstein tried to adopt towards the Bard, and even on the actual goal Wittgenstein pursued with these remarks. Most commentators do agree, however, that Wittgenstein had a generally negative and distanced outlook on Shakespeare. In several places, as we have seen above, he suggests that Shakespeare is a unique phenomenon, who 'stands alone' and who does not even speak our language but creates his own language and world. In Shakespeare's work, Wittgenstein suggests, everything seems wrong 'but is correct according to a law of its own' (Wittgenstein (1998: 89)). These affirmations have often been read as a critique and an expression of distance. Peter Hughes, on the other hand, (Hughes (1992), (1988)) has argued that they show Wittgenstein's admiration of the Bard. Wittgenstein has realized, Hughes suggests, that Shakespeare (and Freud) have tried – very much like he had done himself – to create their own language games and to raise them to the status of a new reality. For Wittgenstein, thus,

> Shakespeare, like Freud, is a rival or great opposite. Both of them, in their different ways, have created on a grand scale *Sprachspiele* or language-games that attempt what he wants to attempt – to become another way of representing the world by offering another world as representation.
>
> (Hughes (1992: 78))

Referring to the just quoted remarks, Derek McDougall comes to quite different conclusions. He does acknowledge that 'Wittgenstein intuitively recognized that Shakespeare was a

poet of a quite distinct order' (McDougall (2016: 305)), but, unlike Hughes, he does not suggest that this implies a positive stance towards the poet, nor does he take it, as Steiner does, as an expression of a deep misunderstanding of Shakespeare. Rather, he suggests that Wittgenstein sketches a critique that – though not very elaborate – is in line with that of other Shakespeare scholars, in particular with that proposed by John Middleton Murry (1936). Even though Wittgenstein did not succeed in overcoming his difficulties in opening himself to the aesthetic beauty of Shakespeare's work, McDougall suggests, he does show an understanding of the greatness of Shakespeare and acknowledges the unique significance of his works. In this way, Wittgenstein's remarks not only reveal something about himself and his aesthetic judgment: they 'also reveal an important insight into the kind of poet Shakespeare was, and so into the nature of the works he created' (McDougall (2016: 307)).

The difficulties we might discover in our attempts to interpret Wittgenstein's remarks on Shakespeare might, at least in part, be due to fact that he never compared him to other poets or writers; the only comparison he drew was with Beethoven. It might, therefore, be interesting to note that several scholars have contrasted Wittgenstein's method and his way of writing with that of Shakespeare, but also along these lines we find wide disagreement. When discussing the literary form of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, Cyril Barret, for example, concludes that 'in form it more closely resembles the plays of Shakespeare than the classical forms of Beethoven' (Barrett (1988: 398)). Marjorie Perloff gives more substance to this claim, arguing that the very asymmetries in Shakespeare's work that Wittgenstein criticized 'became a model for Wittgenstein's own writing, showing him the way to con-duct his own practice of 'teach[ing] us differences'' (Perloff (2014: 271)). These analyses contrast with those of William Day and Joachim Schulte: while the former sees a fun-damental difference in philosophical mentality (Day (2013: 45)), the latter argues that for Wittgenstein Shakespeare personifies 'an example of a writer who is completely different from himself, perhaps even alien to himself' (Schulte (2013: 28)).

Wittgenstein made very few remarks concerning Shakespeare, and none of which were included in any work he had either published or had prepared for publication. Their enigmatic character has nevertheless stimulated an intense debate that has focused not only on the question of whether his judgments were justified but also on what they tell us about the philosopher who formulated them. Shakespeare, it seems to me, was not among the persons who most influenced Wittgenstein. His judgement on the Bard, on the other hand, will continue to spur debate – on Shakespeare's standing, the culture in which he is admired, and on the philosopher who formulated it.

Related topics

See Chapters 4, 26

Further reading

Wittgenstein, L., 1998. *Culture and Value: A Selection from the Posthumous Remains*. Edited by G. H. von Wright and Heikki Nyman. Translated by Peter Winch. Revised edition. Oxford; Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.

Collection of posthumously published remarks that are best described as 'miscellaneous observations', as the title to the German version (*Vermischte Bemerkungen*) suggests. The book contains numerous remarks on composers, poets, and artists, including all of Wittgenstein's remarks on Shakespeare.

Steiner, G., 1996. A Reading against Shakespeare. In: *No Passion Spent: Essays 1978–1996*. London: Faber & Faber, 108–28.

Steiner criticizes Wittgenstein for misreading Shakespeare, arguing that Wittgenstein's ideal of the poet was shaped by German aesthetics of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Wittgenstein's ideal of the poet was that of a moral authority – but he failed to recognize the moral import of Shakespeare's work.

Huemer, W., 2013. 'The Character of a Name': Wittgenstein's Remarks on Shakespeare. In: S. Bru, W. Huemer, and D. Steuer, eds. *Wittgenstein Reading*. Berlin and Boston: de Gruyter.

Huemer aims to show that Wittgenstein's remarks on Shakespeare should be read as part of a larger project: Wittgenstein uses references to poets, composers, and artists to locate and, in a way, portray himself.

McDougall, D., 2016. Wittgenstein's Remarks on William Shakespeare. *Philosophy and Literature* 40(1): 297–308.

McDougall's perceptive article defends the legitimacy of Wittgenstein's reading of Shakespeare by drawing an analogy with the interpretation of John Middleton Murry.

Perloff, M., 2014. Wittgenstein's Shakespeare. *Wittgenstein-Studien* 5(1): 259–72.

Perloff's article gives an illuminating contextualization of the cultural background in which Wittgenstein's perspective on Shakespeare was formed and draws interesting parallels between Wittgenstein's method and that of Shakespeare.

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